

PERSPECTIVE

The Model City

Somerville -- yes, "Slumerville" -- is outperforming its much bigger and wealthier neighbors. What can the Bostons and Wellesleys of the world learn from this little burg that could?

By Thomas M. Keane Jr. | May 14, 2006

The best-run city in Massachusetts is not its biggest. Tiny Somerville, wedged into a corner between Cambridge and Medford, is chockablock with cutting-edge ideas, from a city hot line to computerized tracking of city services to performance-based budgeting. Its openness to change and willingness to use technology are turning around the city often derided as "Slumerville." Once ignored, Somerville is -- almost embarrassingly so -- showing its bigger brethren, including Boston, how things should be done.

With 76,000 residents in 4.1 square miles, Somerville is New England's densest city. Almost a third of its population is foreign born, the city is not well off, and -- bisected by the ugly McGrath/O'Brien Highway and with a minimum of green space -- it won't win many awards for civic beauty. Still, the place is decidedly cool.

In fall 2004, Somerville's newly elected mayor, Joe Curtatone, showed up at Linda Bilmes's public finance course at Harvard's Kennedy School and wowed grad students with talk of reform. He asked for help, and 60 of the 97 students signed up, turning Somerville into their class project. Free of charge, they put in place a radically new budgeting system -- one that focuses on outputs (how many potholes are filled?) instead of inputs (how many workers did we hire?). "I was quite apprehensive," Bilmes recalls, "but it really worked. The city officials were terrific, and the kids bonded with them."

Under former mayor Dorothy Kelly Gay, Somerville had also been looking at CitiStat, a data-driven style of managing government services pioneered by Baltimore's mayor, Martin O'Malley. Now a version dubbed "SomerStat" is in place in 17 departments. On a recent visit, I watched as a host of city officials -- including Police Chief Robert Bradley, police officers, other department heads, and the mayor -- spent an hour going through a detailed checklist of police department projects and plans with SomerStat director Stephanie Hirsch. With me were Thatcher Kezer, the mayor of Amesbury, and Sam Tyler, president of the watchdog Boston Municipal Research Bureau -- both curious to see the much-discussed system in action. The intense, fast-moving session is held every other week. Despite the time it consumes, it seems worth the effort. The police department, for instance, had faced a \$1 million deficit this year. Now it's close to zero. And the way that happened -- for example, by increasing attendance incentives to school crossing guards so that more costly police officers did not have to show up in their place -- speaks of an interdepartmental win-win approach that is rare to find in local government.

The piece de resistance, however, is 311. Dial that number from almost any phone in the city, and you reach Somerville's help line. Street unplowed? Cat up a tree? Want to know your alderman's name? Simple questions are answered. Complex ones get a case number, and residents can track their concerns on the Web as easily as a FedEx package.

It's a remarkable idea: A local government that actually treats its citizens like customers and holds itself accountable to them. Few places in Massachusetts have 311, and no other has put in place Somerville's mix of budgeting and management tools. "These ideas have been out there for a while," wistfully observes the Research Bureau's Tyler, who despairs at Boston's resistance to adopting similar reforms. So what sets Somerville apart?

Mostly, it's attitude. "Be abnormal," Curtatone says, stressing that he seeks out people and ideas that break with convention. "We want to be a laboratory for innovation," adds James Kostaras, the city's head of strategic planning and community development. To that end, Curtatone and his staff are willing to take risks and give credit to others -- which is one reason why policy students want to intern at the city and why several have come on board as full-time employees.

Somerville still has far to go. The 311 system was only rolled out in January, many managers are uncertain about SomerStat, and questions remain about the long-term survival of the new management systems -- do they work only because of Curtatone's enthusiasm, or can they withstand a change of administrations? Nevertheless, this is amazing stuff from a most unexpected place, an example of just how good -- inspiring even -- local government can be. While other cities have been incrementalists, dabbling in urban mechanics, Somerville has been reinventing.

Thomas M. Keane Jr. is a partner in a private equity firm and a former Boston city councilor. E-mail him at tomkeane@tomkeane.com. ■